

FRANK READE



WEEKLY MAGAZINE,

Containing Stories of Adventures on Land, Sea & in the Air.

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Price 5 Cents.

ALONG THE ORINOCO; OR, WITH FRANK READE, JR. IN VENEZUELA. By "NONAME."



The face of the bluff yielded. Undermined, the Moto-Van pitched backward, and the next moment, as if out of a catapult, shot down into the river. It went with a tremendous crash.

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CHAPTER I.

THE PROJECT FORMED.

"The horseless age has come," said Prof. Peregrine emphatically, as he brandished a newspaper in his hands. "Poor Dobbin will now have to take a back seat or public sentiment will have to be unanimous in suppressing the new invention."

"I hardly credit that," said Frank Reade, Jr., the famous young inventor, as he lit a cigar. "To be sure the horseless carriage will be a handy innovation, but rest assured the horse will still have his uses."

"Oh, by no means will I deny that," said the learned scientist; "but largely, you know, especially in our large cities and on the pavements transportation will be made with the new motors."

"What proof have you of that?"

"Here it is. Uncle Sam proposes to use the horseless carriage for the carrying of his mails across New York. A newspaper item—no doubt a fact."

Frank Reade, Jr., puffed his cigar for some moments thoughtfully.

At the moment the two men were in the private draughting room of the machine works at Readestown.

Prof. Peregrine had been Frank's Greek instructor at college, and the two were the warmest of friends. Chancing to visit the neighborhood of Readestown, the savant had accepted an invitation to sojourn with Frank a few days.

The professor had always liked Frank immensely, and was intensely proud of the honor of having had him for a pupil.

He had inspected the works and Frank's inventions with the greatest of interest. Particularly he had been taken with the latest production of Frank's genius.

This was the Electric Moto-Van.

It was itself nothing more nor less than a horseless vehicle, although upon a large scale. The reader shall have a description of it later on.

Frank was much impressed with the words of Professor Peregrine. He knew that the horseless carriage was by no means impracticable.

In fact he was the inventor of one himself, and he was able to make it travel at great speed by means of electric motors.

This storage system he believed was his own secret. He had imparted it to no one. It was certainly an advantage over any other motive power.

He realized that this new system of locomotion was likely to revolutionize the country. It caused him many curious reflections.

And he might have ruminated upon the subject for a good while, had not Peregrine interrupted him by reading another paragraph.

"The natural wealth of Venezuela.—Mighty treasures lie dormant in the mountains of Raraima, the wonderland of South America. Also valuable gold claims exist along the upper Orinoco, only awaiting the magic touch of civilization to spring into mighty being."

The professor continued to read of the wonderland of Venezuela. Of the mighty elevated plateaus, with sides so precipitous that man could not scale them.

It was believed that upon these elevated plateaus, from which no safe descent could be made, there might exist forms of animal life which may have been extinct in other parts of the world. Trees and vegetation unknown elsewhere. Especially were naturalists and botanists eager to scale the great island in the air.

But all attempts had failed.

Even though many had braved the climate and the deadly perils of the forests, they had been brought to a halt by the insurmountable palisades, or walls of rock, in many places fully two thousand feet high. There seemed but one way of reaching the island in the air, and that was by means of a balloon.

As the professor finished reading this narrative, Frank looked up and their eyes met.

"Frank," said the scientist with sudden inspiration, "there is a good field for exploration. You have been in doubt as to where to travel with your Moto-Van; why not go to Raraima?"

Frank drew a deep breath.

"Would you like to go to Raraima?" he asked with an odd light in his eyes.

The scientist gave a great start.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes!"

Peregrine dropped his spectacles and the newspaper. For one moment he stared at Frank and said:

"Would you take me as a passenger?"

"If you will go."

"None!"

They gripped hands and thus was the compact made. There was no more talk, no further arrangement just then.

But both knew that they were about to embark upon a perilous undertaking.

The more Peregrine thought of the matter the more overjoyed he became. He arose and said:

"Let us go and look the Moto-Van over. Really, Frank, I feel quite glib over this new enterprise."

"I am glad of that," said Frank heartily, and he touched a bell.

Instantly the door opened and a comical little negro appeared on the threshold. He bowed and showed his teeth in a broad grin.

"Wha' am it yo' want, Marse Frank?"

"Pomp," said the young inventor, "have you and Barney ordered the stores for the Moto-Van yet as I told you?"

"Begorra, that we have, Misther Frank," cried a voice in a rich brogue, and over Pomp's shoulder there appeared a shock of red hair, a freckled face and comical mug of a genuine type of Irishman.

Barney O'Shea, the Celt, and Pomp, the negro, were old and tried servants of the Reade family, they having been in the employ of Frank's father, an inventor before him.

Wherever Frank traveled Barney and Pomp were sure to be his companions. They had never failed him.

"That is good!" cried Frank, with much satisfaction. "Then it will not take us long to get ready for the start."

"The start, sor!" cried Barney. "Shure, are we goin' on a thrip with the new Moto-Van, sor?"

"Yes," replied Frank, "and it must be in readiness for the start very soon."

"Golly, I'se drefful glad ob dat," cried Pomp, cutting a shuffle. "Jes' got tired ob stayin' roun' home all de time."

"Bejabbers, an' wnd it be impoodent to ax yez where we are afther goin' sor?" asked Barney.

"To the wonderland of Venezuela," said Frank. "That, of course you know, is in South America."

"Dat am berry fine," cried Pomp. "t allns had a great desiah fo' to go to Souf America."

"Begorra, that suits me!" cried Barney.

"Very well," said Frank. "Now be off, both of you, and have all in readiness as quickly as possible."

"A'right, sah!"

"We'll do that, sor."

Barney made a dive through the door out into the machine shop. Pomp was after him.

Jolly fellows they were, and as full of jokes as a nut is of meat. Their worst fault was a penchant for skylarking.

So exuberant were they just now that they could not let the opportunity go by.

As Barney went to turn the corner of the building, Pomp

pretended to slip and threw out his foot. It somehow got in the way of Barney's, and the Celt went down on his noddle.

The worst of it was, a vat, in which the iron workers cooled their models, was within reach, and before Barney could recover himself he went head first into it.

It was deep enough to immerse him entirely, and the water was redolent with iron rust and clay. The Irishman was a sight to behold when he crawled gasping out of the bath.

His face was plastered with iron rust, and his plentiful hair was matted with clay. As for the rest of his person, it had nearly doubled in weight, so tenaciously did the filth stick to him.

A madder Hibernian was perhaps never seen than Barney O'Shea at that moment. He could only gasp and fume and try to get out of his shell of rust and clay.

As for Pomp, he lay groveling in the cinders which strewed the yard, unable to rise with paroxysms of laughter.

"He—he—he! Hi—hi—hi! Ho—ho—ho! Haw—haw—whish—ish—ow—um—oh, golly, dat am de berry funniest ting I eber seed!"

And he went off into another fit. As for Barney, he was vainly endeavoring to speak.

"Funny is it, yez omadhoun!" he finally shrieked, as he gained his voice. "Mebbe yez think so, but I'll show yez somethin' funnier as soon as iver I get this dhirty sthuff aff me."

He threw off his jacket, and this so lightened him that he was able to act. He made a rush at the darky.

Pomp saw him coming and started to beat a retreat.

But he was just too late. The Celt was upon him like a fury.

Then the tricky coon got partly a dose of his own medicine. The two clutched and fell, rolling over and over.

It was a comical sight.

The struggle which followed was a long and sanguinary one. But finally Pomp apologized for his trick and agreed to help the Celt restore his garments to their original color.

This ended the scrape. Both hurried away to clean up, and then to execute Frank's orders.

This took some time, but when awhile later Frank found them they were busily engaged in equipping the machine for the great trip.

Barney was a skilled electrician and mechanic, and Pomp was the prince of cooks. While the Irishman looked after the machinery and the engines he attended to the galley.

And leaving them thus occupied let us return to Frank and the professor, who had set out to pay a visit to the Moto-Van.

They left the draughting room and crossed the yard to a building with a high-trussed roof.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE ORINOCO.

Opening the big door, Frank led the way into this building. It was designed for the storage place of the Van.

And immediately upon entering the new invention was in full view. For a moment the professor gazed upon it spell-bound.

The Moto-Van was an imposing sight as it was thus revealed. It needed but a glance for the scientist to see that it was a marvel of inventive skill.

The body of the vehicle rested upon a running gear of very light but strong steel. The wheels were four in number, and equipped with heavy pneumatic tires of a bicycle pattern.

Electricity, of course, was the motive power, and the system of storage was Frank's secret. But great power and speed could be developed over a level stretch of ground.

The general plan of the Moto-Van somewhat resembled that of a park phaeton. The body was of thin steel, bullet proof.

Forward was a tower in which was a heavy plate-glass window. In this tower was the steering wheel and electric keyboard. Forward of this was a small platform and a dasher. Here was the wonderful electric gun, which was a remarkable invention of Frank's.

This gun was a thin tube of steel with an air-chamber. A dynamite projectile placed in it could be thrown to the distance of fully half a mile. The projectile, exploded by impact, was most deadly in its work.

Frank had placed this engine of destruction aboard the Van for the purpose, not of aggression, but defense.

In the wild, uncivilized parts of the world which he might visit, there was no doubt but that this would be needed.

The rear of the vehicle consisted of a chaise-like top of bullet-proof steel. In this was the living room of the travelers. There was a huge plate-glass window and a line of loopholes below it for use of rifles in time of defense.

A powerful electric searchlight was also placed over the pilot-house tower. Here was a small deck with a brass hand rail.

Doors opened from either side of the Van with steps. So deep was the body of the vehicle that one could pass from

the pilot-house to the head or rear part without being exposed above the steel bulwarks.

In the rear of the vehicle there were berths and a dressing room, a general living room, with tables, chairs, and eating utensils, and a service of silver.

To attempt to describe all the little adjuncts so necessary in detail would require too much space.

But below the main floor or deck of the Van there were commodious lockers, where could be stored provisions, ammunition, and many things indispensable on a long tour.

There were stands of small arms for defense in the armory or gun room under the pilot-house.

It was really wonderful what an amount of stuff could be carried in such a small space, so economically was all arranged.

The dynamos and storage system were under the pilot-house, and in such compact form that their presence would hardly have been suspected from a superficial view of the Van. But this delicate electric machinery was more powerful than one might fancy.

This is an inadequate description of the wonderful Moto-Van, but as the reader is doubtless eager to pass on to the thrilling incidents of our story, we will devote no more time to it just now.

Professor Peregrine, for the second time, went over the Moto-Van, and when the inspection was complete, drew a deep breath and said:

"On my word, it cannot be beat; you have outdone yourself, Frank!"

"Well, I am a trifle proud of the Van myself," said Frank, "although it is as yet untried."

"There is no doubt of its success," said the scientist, with shining eyes. "Now, Frank, the question is, how do you propose to get to the Orinoco country?"

"There is but one way."

"And that——"

The young inventor threw away his cigar.

"I shall charter a steamer, put the machine aboard it and land somewhere near Ciudad Bolivar, or Angostura, which is at the mouth of the Orinoco. Then we will proceed along that river until near its source, when we will cut across to Raraima, and thence back to the starting point. This will make a complete circle and enable us to see the entire wonderland of the Venezuelan interior."

Frank drew a small map from his pocket and indicated the course.

The professor was satisfied.

"Very good," he said, with alacrity; "I have a little proposition to make."

"Well?"

"I have always had a desire to visit Caracas, and as I may never be so near that city again I will take a fast steamer to-night and go thither. I shall have several days' start of you, and I will meet you at Ciudad Bolivar and join you there."

"That is agreed," said Frank. "I shall endeavor to sail from New York Thursday."

"And this is Monday. That will give me plenty of time then. I will go now and take the train."

They shook hands and parted. The professor was quickly whirling away toward New York.

Frank at once wired a company in New York for a steamer. The great project was under way.

Let us pass quickly over the incidents of the sea voyage from New York to the mouth of the Orinoco.

Suffice it to say that the Southern Cross, which was the steamer's name, landed Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp, and the Moto-Van safely in due time at Ciudad Bolivar.

The little city of the Gringos was all astir over the distinguished arrivals, and the American Consul met them at the wharf. A large throng cheered them when they landed, for Americans are popular in Venezuela.

Professor Peregrine was there right on time, and glad to meet his countrymen. The Van was quickly landed.

The governor of the province was profuse in his expressions of welcome, and Frank showed him over the Van to his inexpressible wonder and delight.

There was no courtesy or favor which the Venezuelans were not glad to show the distinguished travelers.

Preparations were quickly made for the start, and soon the four voyagers were on board the Moto-Van waving an adieu to the crowd.

Then the start was made.

The little streets of Angostura were quickly passed through, and then a southward course was taken.

This was to avoid the great swamp which for a great ways met the river's edge, and which was impassable.

The voyagers knew well enough what was before them. They had read enough about the region through which the Orinoco ran to realize that it was but little inferior to the Amazon for wildness and peril.

They knew that they were entering upon a region infested with wild beasts and reptiles and savage men. They knew that the climate was fearfully torrid, and that fevers abounded in all the lowlands.

But the Van was so arranged that at night the shutters could be closed and the chemicals of a disinfectant or germ

destroying character were placed about the sleeping berths. In fact, every contingency was well provided for.

As far as Altagracia, the voyagers were told that they would encounter no perils of a serious nature unless it might be some lawless roving band of brigands, of which there were many.

This was a distance of about two hundred miles. Most of the way would be through extensive plantations.

But beyond that point they might expect to enter upon the wildest regions of the Orinoco.

Roads of varying character were found and the machine pushed forward over these at a rapid rate.

Many of the natives were met. Some were on horseback or rode upon the stages which have lines in all parts of Venezuela. But the most of them were on foot.

All the Gringos were amazed at the appearance of the Van, and were disposed to wonder much what sort of magic power impelled the vehicle.

But in nearly all cases they were exceedingly respectful and polite, hailing the travelers with:

"Buenos Senors!"

The salutation was always returned. In some of the little villages the Alcalde might attempt to show his authority by stopping the Van.

But a glance at the passports, signed by the President himself, always insured free passage.

Thus the machine bowled merrily on, and the voyagers enjoyed the experience.

They were never tired of studying the strange country about them, and fresh wonders were constantly appearing to view.

There were many magnificent plantations along the banks of the great river. Many hearty invitations were extended the travelers to sojourn awhile by the way, but they always declined with thanks.

Mile after mile sped by.

At night the searchlight was used and progress was slow. But the distance was rapidly covered.

No incident of an exciting sort occurred until just before Altagracia was reached.

It was near the hour of midnight, and Barney was in the pilot-house.

His hand was on the steering wheel, and in the glare of the searchlight he could see the road for perhaps a hundred yards ahead.

The rest or continuation of it was lost beyond a bend in the wall of a deep defile.

The Celt was entirely off his guard and not looking for any trouble, so he did not scrutinize the road very closely.

What was his amazement therefore and that of all on board to suddenly receive a terrific shock, and the Van came to a sudden dead stop.

The dynamos buzzed, the wheels flew around in the dirt, and fearful of injuring the tires Barney shut off the current.

"Why, what is the matter, Barney?" cried Frank, rushing into the pilot-house.

CHAPTER III.

THE VENEZUELAN BANDITS.

"Shure, sor, I don't know," stuttered the amazed Celt. "The masheen won't go at all, sor."

Then both glanced through the window and saw the trouble at once.

It gave them a thrill.

Across the defile was stretched a powerful cable.

This bore against the prow of the Moto-Van and held it firmly in check. The power of the electric engines was not sufficient to break the rope.

"What the deuce is all that?" exclaimed Frank in astonishment.

"Eh, what's the matter, Frank?" cried Peregrine, as he appeared on the scene at this moment.

"Look for yourself," said Frank. "Do you see that big rope?"

"To be sure I do!" cried the astonished scientist. "What does it mean? Is somebody bound to stop us?"

In that instant Frank remembered the repeated warnings they had received regarding brigands. But just then the explanation came.

Into the defile from around the bend there suddenly appeared a score of masked horsemen.

They were dressed in the usual Gringo garb, and the leader, pointing his carbine at the Van shouted in Spanish:

"Deliver, senors! It is your money or your life!"

"Do you dare stop us?" Frank shouted in reply. "We have government passports."

"Then you have government money?" replied the Gringo chief with a jeering laugh; "be so kind as to hand the treasure over and save your necks."

"We have no government treasure nor any other kind," replied Frank. "We are American travelers and you stop us at your peril!"

The Gringo brigand laughed.

"Very good, *Senor Americano!*" he replied suavely: "the American gold is better than ours. Consider yourselves fortunate to get off with your lives. Many a foolish fellow has lost his life on this very spot for less hesitation than this."

"Look here, Gringo," replied Frank, sharply. "Let me tell you something. You cannot do us harm. This vehicle is supplied with weapons and men. I have a dynamite gun which can blow you all into perdition in less time than it takes to think of it. I warn you to let us pass."

For a moment the Gringo bandit seemed impressed by Frank's words.

Then he said harshly:

"Unless you deliver at once I shall order my men to fire upon you!"

"We shall not deliver," said Frank, resolutely. "We do not fear your bullets; they cannot hurt us!"

The brigand chief said a few hot words in Spanish to his men. Then bullets came rattling against the pilot-house.

Of course they did no harm.

But it angered Frank.

"Get your rifles, Barney and Pomp," he said. "Answer them! They'll soon get sick of that!"

The Gringos were full of pluck and of fight; but a few lively volleys from the defenders of the Van soon put a new face on matters.

Any number of armed men could not withstand such a volley. They began dropping from their saddles like hail.

In a few moments they gave way in a wild retreat. Barney and Pomp were elated.

"Bogorra, Mither Frank," cried the Celt, "we've foixed the omadhouns, bad cess to them."

Pomp picked up a sharp knife and ran out on the forward platform. He began to hack away at the cable.

It took him some moments to cut it, but he finally succeeded, and returned to the pilot-house.

The Moto-Van now started ahead. But fearful groans were heard, and one of the brigands was seen trying to crawl away into the shadows.

An idea occurred to Frank.

"Capture him!" he cried. "We will take him down to Altigracia and deliver him up to the authorities. Perhaps it will help them to break up this band of rascals!"

Barney and Pomp needed no second bidding. They leaped down and made a prisoner of the brigand.

They brought him aboard securely bound, for he had attempted resistance. He was a tall, dark and swarthy villain, with long moustachios and keen black eyes.

"I believe we've got the chief of the gang," cried Peregrine, as he studied the fellow; "he is no ordinary Gringo."

Indeed there was logic in the professor's statement.

The brigand was richly dressed in the Gringo style and wore costly jewels in his sombrero band. He was questioned, but would only make a surly reply.

Not until he learned that he was to be delivered up at Altigracia did he unbend.

Then he began to plead for his liberty. Evidently he feared the justice which would be meted out to him there.

And there was good reason.

He finally admitted that he was the outlaw chief, Black Juan, whose name was a terror in those parts.

"I will pay any ransom, *senors,*" he pleaded. "Release me, shoot me if you will, but do not take me to Altigracia."

The professor was much impressed by his pleadings, and seemed inclined to sympathize with him, but Frank pretended to be inexorable.

"We can show you no mercy," he said, sternly. "You would willingly have taken our lives."

"For the sake of Jesu, pity," cried the agonized bandit. "I swear that I will haunt this defile never again. I am not afraid to die, and would rather be shot than fall into the hands of my foes at Altigracia. They are more cruel than your people. They will not kill me. They will torture me."

"That is true enough," Frank whispered to Peregrine. "These Spanish people are terribly vindictive in their punishment of crime."

"Then," said Peregrine, "it seems inhuman to give him up to them."

Frank made no reply to this, but went into the pilot-house and started the Van ahead.

Peregrine, not satisfied, followed Frank.

"Do you think it is right, Frank, to give this man up to be tortured alive?" he asked.

"What would you do with him?" asked the young inventor.

"Either shoot him or set him free!"

"If we shoot him it would be murder, if we set him free will he not return to his former life? Do you not think that he would treat a prisoner with the same cruelty that he would be treated with by his foes?"

Peregrine was staggered.

"Well," he spluttered finally. "What will you do with him, Frank?"

"Why not deliver him up to the officers of the law—with a fair chance that he will be justly tried in a court of justice?"

"If you can be assured of that."

"If I am not, I shall not give him up."

"Good for you, Frank!" cried the scientist heartily. "You

are right after all. I know that you will bring matters out right."

"I will try to," said Frank resolutely.

The machine bowled on down the defile in the glare of the archlight. Nothing more was seen of the outlaws.

It was in the gray light of dawn that the Van finally emerged from the mountain fastnesses. Frank knew that Altagracia was not many miles distant.

But as the Moto-Van was descending the smooth road to the plain below a body of horsemen were seen drawn up across the highway.

It was at a point where they could not readily pass, for high rocks were upon either side. Frank was somewhat startled when he saw that the body of men wore uniforms and were armed.

They were Government cavalry, and were evidently waiting the approach of the Van. Frank slackened speed a trifle.

"That is queer," he muttered. "I wonder if they want to speak to us?"

"That is evidently their purpose," agreed Peregrine.

"Can they have come hither for that purpose? What sort of a wrinkle is this, anyway?" exclaimed the young inventor, deeply puzzled.

But the mystery was quickly solved. The cavalymen suddenly put spurs to their horses and rode forward.

They surrounded the Van, which had come to a stop. Frank could easily have dashed through them, but he did not think this politic.

The leader or captain of the squad was a fiery little Spaniard, with an enormous mustache. He brandished his sword and rode pompously up to the Van.

Frank stepped out on the platform.

"Buenos senor," said Frank, in his best Spanish. "Why this hostile reception? You are not brigands?"

"No, senor," replied the little officer, biting his lip with the force of the satire. "We are hunting brigands, and especially Black Juan."

Frank gave a start.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. "Who is this Black Juan?"

"He is a brother to the devil and shielded by him. We are never able to get our hands upon him. But you are not of our country?"

"No," replied Frank; "we are Americans."

"Whence came you?"

"From Ciudad Bolivar!"

The lieutenant gave a start.

"Impossible!" he cried. "You did not come through the Black Pass last night?"

"We did!" affirmed Frank.

"Then you must have met Black Juan or some of his gang?"

"We did!" agreed Frank; "but we easily put them to flight with a few rifle volleys. We then kept straight on!"

The lieutenant seemed astonished.

"And you paid no tribute?"

"Not a cent!"

"Caramba! that is wonderful! You are the first, senors, to pass Black Juan without toll!"

"Is that true?"

"Si, senor!"

"Then you hunt the life of Black Juan?"

"We do!"

"What would you do with him if he should fall into your hands to-day?"

The lieutenant's eyes glittered with a terrible murderous look. He replied:

"If we could lay hands on him now we would burn out his eyes and flay him alive!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE PURSUERS.

Frank could not help a shudder at this blood-curdling announcement.

"Whew!" he ejaculated in an undertone. "There is nothing bloodthirsty in that, is there?"

"Oh, but these Gringos are terrible in their hatred of a foe!" said Peregrine; "they would stop at nothing."

"Indeed, I believe you!" agreed Frank. "I would not think of delivering the prisoner up to these wretches. They are worse than he is."

But the little lieutenant now cried:

"If you have just come through the Black Pass you must have met with Juan and his men."

"We did," replied Frank; "but I am in a hurry to get to Altagracia. Be so kind as to give us the road!"

"We can only let you pass on one consideration," said the Spaniard.

"Well, what is it?"

"You must show passports."

The lieutenant looked as if he felt sure of entrapping the Americans. But Frank said politely:

"To be sure. They are signed by your dignitary at Angaitura. Are you satisfied now?"

Frank showed the passports. The lieutenant at once became submissive.

He drew his men up in face lines, and as the Van passed between them the Spanish soldiers saluted.

Black Juan was saved at that moment from an awful fate. He could thank his captors for this.

He crouched, pallid and shivering, in one corner of the Van until the cavalry squad was left far behind. Then he began wildly to murmur his gratitude.

"If I had been sure that they would have given you a fair trial and just punishment," said Frank, "I would very gladly have given you up to them."

"I am willing to meet the penalty for my deeds," said the outlaw chief, "if I may be given a speedy death. It was the torture I feared."

The Van was now rapidly approaching Altagracia. Something must be done, as Frank well knew.

He drew Peregrine to one side, and they held a consultation.

They did not care about turning Black Juan over to the authorities for such barbarous treatment. On the other hand, they could not retain him as a prisoner.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed the young inventor. "I am at a loss to know what to do. I don't want to kill him."

"There is but one logical move," said Peregrine.

"Ah, what is that?"

"Set him free!"

"To return to his bandit career?"

"No. These Spaniards fear an oath. Bind him most sacredly to abandon forever his outlaw career."

"Done!" said Frank with a breath of relief. "I agree with you; that's our best and only course."

So Black Juan was interviewed.

The result was that he took a solemn oath to abandon his career as a highwayman forever.

"I can easily afford to do that," he said, "for I am wealthy. I shall return to Spain and do penance. I thank you, senors, for your noble forbearance."

So just before reaching Altagracia and in a deep stretch of wood the famed bandit was set free. He plunged into the forest and was seen no more.

All on board the Moto-Van felt better for this move. They were not sure, of course, that Juan would keep his contract, but there was yet a chance that he would do so.

On rolled the Van now, and into the little town of Altagracia.

Of course a sensation was created, and they were instantly surrounded by a great throng. But Frank met the alcalde with his passport, which made everything all right.

All of our voyagers were intent upon reaching the unsettled part of Venezuela. As Altagracia did not materially differ from any of the little Spanish towns they had little interest there.

However, the day was spent there and the night as well. The next day they set out due west, and in a few hours the gleaming waters of the great river were once more before them.

All evidences of human settlements began to vanish, and the mighty forests of dyewood and gum trees loomed up near at hand.

Among these mighty giants of nature the machine ran rapidly. It was lucky that no jungle or dense underbrush here existed to bar progress.

The scenes now beheld upon every hand were of a truly wonderful character. In the dense thicket the striped jacket of the jaguar flashed. Apes played in the branches of the trees and birds of gorgeous plumage were upon every hand.

It was a grand spectacle.

It was patent that they were in the very heart of the tropics. In the swamps the distant bellow of the alligator could be heard, and the harsh cries of the herons.

Huge boa-constrictors hung in wait from the branches of trees or glided away like an avalanche through the undergrowth.

None of these denizens of the forest, however, ventured to attack the vehicle until it had come to the very deepest and darkest part of the Orinoco forest.

Then a sudden wild and hideous commotion was heard just ahead. A herd of wood deer came fleetly bounding by. Birds and monkeys chattered and shrieked in the treetops.

"What the deuce is to pay?" cried Peregrine. "Can you tell, Frank?"

"Listen!" said the young inventor.

A sound like the heavy pattering of rain was heard. Then the ground trembled slightly.

Next into view there came a myriad of little brown forms, darting down among the tree trunks with fearful speed. A peculiar grunting noise was heard.

"Peccaries," ejaculated Peregrine.

"Just so," exclaimed Frank.

Both knew what a formidable foe the peccary or wild hog of South America is.

Small and insignificant singly, yet when met in droves of hundreds, and even thousands, they were to be fearfully dreaded.

No living creature could hope to stand in their path. They would sweep all before them.

Descending through the forests, they would leave a path

of destruction behind them for miles. Woe to the man or beast overtaken.

With their sharp tusks one keen blow was sufficient to fell the victim, when he was instantly torn to pieces.

The voyagers had good reason to congratulate themselves at the moment that they were safe aboard the Moto-Van.

"Will they not do damage to the vehicle?" asked Peregrine.

"I think we can avoid that," said Frank, as he halted the Van just behind a mighty mahogany tree; "this will break the force of the attack."

Of course, the peccaries were obliged to divide at the tree. So fast were they going that they could not stop long enough to do the machine much damage.

Frank only feared for the rubber tires on the wheels. These received a few gashes, but in a few moments the danger was over.

"Thank goodness!" cried Peregrine, "may we meet no more of those chaps."

"Begorra, I'd loike to 'ave got wan av thim fer a roast," cried Barney, "shure, they'd ought to make foiner bacon!"

"Well, their flesh is very good," said Frank, "but it is as much as your life is worth to kill one of them."

"Is that true?" interrogated Peregrine.

"They say that the peccary always avenges the death of one of their number. They are a queer little animal."

The Van went on once more, and every hour now took them deeper into the Orinoco forest.

There was plenty on all sides to divert their attention and keep the voyagers constantly interested.

At times they were obliged to ford little streams, but Frank had equipped the Van for just such a contingency.

There were small paddles which could be affixed to the wheels. The Van was positively water tight, and could float like a cork.

It was easy for her to cross anywhere that the current was moderate. Indeed, at times it was necessary to continue the journey some distance by water.

At night camp was always made, as it was not deemed feasible to travel then.

The brilliant electric lights of the vehicle probably contributed to keep wild animals at arm's length, though they could at all times be seen hovering about in the shadows.

One day the Van came out into an open and mounted a little plateau.

From this an extensive view of the great river which here flowed northward could be had. It was a magnificent spectacle.

Upon either side the monster selvas or forests, dense in

their tropical verdure, extended as far as the eye could reach. It was one mighty ocean of green.

Southward upon the dim horizon mighty mountain peaks and ranges were seen.

"That is in the Parima range," said Frank; "the Orinoco finds its source there. Eventually we shall reach the base of those mountains."

"And then——" interrogated Peregrine.

"Then we will leave the Orinoco and skirt those mountains across the great table-lands to Raraima."

"What a mighty project!"

"Yes, and I doubt if few white explorers have ever compassed it."

"I agree with you. We could hardly hope to do it without the Van."

"That is true."

At this moment Barney, who had been looking back to the verge of the forest below from whence they had just come, gave a great cry.

"Begorra, Misther Frank," he shouted, "wud yez come here quick? Shure, it's followin' us they are!"

"Eh?" exclaimed the young inventor, in surprise. "What do you mean by that, Barney?"

"Wud yez be afther lookin' down there, sor?"

Barney pointed down to the edge of the forest. It was full half a mile distant.

But, there, plainly visible and just emerged from the dark depths were a full half hundred human forms.

Even at that distance it could be seen that they were natives of the wilds, and armed with javelins and shields. That they were really in pursuit of the Moto-Van was beyond dispute.

CHAPTER V.

THE ELECTRIC WIRE.

For a moment all the voyagers gazed upon the scene in surprise.

How long the natives had followed them it was not easy to guess. It might have been for many miles.

As the progress of the machine through the forest had been necessarily slow, it could not have bothered them at all to keep up.

Frank realized this.

"Golly," said Pomp, cutting a shuffle, "does yo' spee dey mean to gib us a fight?"

Frank shook his head.

"I can hardly believe that," he said; "it is probably curiosity which has led them on."

"Yet," argued Peregrine, "I have heard ugly reports of the natives of the Orinoco selvas."

"Allow that they are hostile," said Frank; "I hardly think we need fear them greatly. One shell from the dynamite gun would blow them off the earth."

However, the voyagers watched the pursuing blacks with interest. They did not remain exposed for long, however, but slunk out of sight behind clumps of bushes.

Frank remained on the plateau a short while longer.

Then once more the course was laid for the Moto-Van.

Frank pointed to a distant bend of the mighty river and said:

"We will set a course by compass directly for that bend. There we will rest for a day or two and devote some time to sport, such as hunting and fishing. I think we will find a clearing there by the river bank."

Peregrine had been studying the distant point with a glass, and now said:

"I agree with you, Frank. It looks as if there was a high bluff there clear of the trees."

"Just the spot," cried Frank.

"Begorra, it's itching I am to have a thry at some of them ducks," cried Barney.

"Yo' jes' see de fish dis chile will catch," declared Pomp.

Frank set the course accurately with the compass. Then, with all in high spirits, the start was made.

Down from the plateau and into the forest again the Van ran. But progress was found to be not quite so easy as in the past.

The underbrush and fern growth became quite thick. But Frank had even provided for this.

He had provided steel knives which were fitted to the axles of the vehicle, and which could mow down even a small sapling.

Progress was necessarily slow, but it was nevertheless steady.

Darkness found them full thirty miles from the plateau they had left that morning. It was not until then that any remembered their pursuers.

"By Plato!" exclaimed Peregrine, "I forgot all about the Indians. Do you think they have followed us?"

"There is no doubt of it," said Frank, confidently.

"They could not lose our trail."

"No, it is broad and plain."

"But thirty miles in one day in this hot climate——"

"Pshaw! It is nothing for these Orinoco Indians. They are tireless and inured to the heat."

"Well," said Peregrine, somewhat anxiously, "had we not better keep double guard to-night? I am willing to serve."

"One guard will be enough," said Frank. "Leave it to me."

The place selected for the camp was right under a heavy mahogany, and in the thickest part of the selvas.

Overhead there were matted vines and parasitic air plants of all kinds, even to the almost utter exclusion of a view of the sky.

Chattering troops of monkeys hovered in the branches near; but Barney singed the paws of a few of them with an electric wire, and thereafter they did not venture too near the Van.

As soon as the machine had made a clearing by making several circuits with the axle knives, Frank went into the engine room and brought out a coil of wire.

Leaving the machine, he proceeded to make a circle about the clearing with the wire, placing it upon rests about a foot from the ground. Then he returned to the engine room, and made connections which would throw the full force of the dynamos into the wire.

Any living creature, animal or human, which should come in contact with that wire would be likely to be instantly sorry.

Darkness always comes rapidly in the tropics.

It was but a very short while before all was inky black beyond the radius of the electric lights.

The voyagers sat up on deck until quite a late hour.

Barney and Pomp furnished a fund of entertainment with banjo and fiddle. They were jolly souls and well able to kill ennui at any time.

It was Barney's first watch, and as the others retired for a sleep Frank cautioned him.

"If anything unusual appears in the vicinity," he said, "at once alarm me!"

"I will, sor!" agreed the Celt.

For an hour Barney paced the deck of the Moto-Van without seeing anything alarming.

The forest was full of noises, as was always the case. He could hear the distant howling of beasts and the discordant cry of night birds.

These even ventured near the vehicle. Once Barney heard a crunching in the undergrowth, and saw a huge jaguar just within the circle of light.

Instinctively the Celt drew back the hammer of his rifle, for it really looked as if the beast was not in fear of the electric light and would come aboard.

But there was no real danger.

Though the beast came near enough to brush against the

wire which Frank had placed there. The result was terrible.

Into the air, full ten feet, went the body of the animal. A fearful agonized yelp and then all was still.

Barney saw the jaguar's form lying quivering in the grass, and was tempted to fire a shot into it before it could recover and make away.

But he did not, for he knew that it would arouse his companions and create needless alarm.

He resumed his pace from one end of the vehicle to the other. Not much time elapsed, however, before the Celt received a thrilling shock.

Suddenly, from the dark depths of the forest he saw a dark shadow glide. Another followed, and still another.

In a very few moments a full dozen of these intangible forms were grouped there.

Barney drew back the hammer of his rifle.

"Bejabers, it's thim black injuns," he muttered. "I've a mind to risk a shot at thim!"

The dark forms glided forward. It was evident that they meant to board the Moto-Van.

But they never did.

Just at that moment there arose a shower of sparks from the grass. A fearful yell went up, then another and another.

The dark forms went tumbling about like tenpins. In his excitement Barney fired into the throng, and then pressed the alarm gong.

But the savages fled into the depths of the forest, taking the unconscious ones with them.

Frank laughed uproariously; it was to him a funny denouement.

"Well, now, I'd like to know what the thoughts of those savages are just now?" he cried. "I'll wager they are an astonished lot."

"I believe you!" cried Peregrine; "they won't venture to follow us any further, I reckon."

"That is where you are wrong," said Frank. "The curiosity of these natives is really wonderful. I wouldn't be surprised if they dogged us for hundreds of miles."

"Will they venture to attack us again, do you think?"

"Perhaps not!"

"But their near presence is a constant menace!"

"Just so!"

"Can we not shake them off in any way? Break the rail?"

"I know of no possible way," said Frank, "unless we could take a water course for some miles. Even then I believe they would keep us in sight."

"They are a shrewd lot!"

"Indeed they are, else they could not hope to exist in this part of the world."

There was no more sleep for the party that night.

Nobody thought of going back to bed, and all sat up until daylight came discussing the affair.

Then Frank took in the wire and camp was broken up. The Van was soon on its way again.

For two days longer the dense forest was traversed. Then on the morning of the third the objective point as seen from the plateau was reached.

The voyagers came out upon a sort of bluff which overlooked the stagnant surface of the mighty river.

There it lay before them in all its mighty volume. In the lagoon just below scores of alligators were basking.

"Hooray!" shouted Pomp. "We've done got here at last, Marse Frank! Git yo' gun, I'ish, we've gwine to hab lily bit ob a hunt now."

"Aisy, naygur," said Barney. "Shure it's somethin' fer the inner man we must be afther havin' first."

Pomp took the hint and proceeded to serve up a smoking hot meal.

After this was disposed of the hunting party was organized. As there was no sign of a foe in the vicinity it was deemed safe to leave the Moto-Van alone for a short while.

Frank and Peregrine were anxious to explore the river bank for a ways, while Barney and Pomp had the hunting and fishing fever.

The wheels of the Van were set, the rail was charged with the electric current, and it would be a hardy savage who would essay more than one trial at getting on board.

CHAPTER VI.

A DEADLY STRUGGLE.

On the whole it was against Frank's better sense to go off and leave the machine unguarded.

But as nothing had been seen of the natives for a good while back, he was constrained to believe that they had given over the chase.

He had no fear of any wild beasts or aught else doing the vehicle any harm. So he banished all scruples.

With the professor close at his heels he soon reached the river bank.

It was easy to find their way along the water's edge. The

professor was an ardent botanist and Frank was a naturalist.

So while Peregrine was collecting orchids from the tree branches Frank employed himself in netting rare butterflies.

And thus engaged, they wandered on for some miles.

Indeed, they hardly realized how far they had gone until suddenly Frank noted that the sun was low in the western sky.

Then right in a huge growth of rushes he came upon a somewhat startling discovery.

There was a small hut made of reeds and the bark of trees. It was skillfully constructed and certainly the abode of human beings.

But it was now empty and had no appearance of having been occupied for a long while.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young inventor. "What do you think of it, Peregrine? Are we near a native settlement?"

"I hardly know what to think," said the surprised scientist. "We might continue our explorations further."

"No," said Frank, sinking wearily down upon a rude bench in the hut: "let us stay here a few moments to rest. It is nice and cool!"

"We have not any too much time left in which to get back to the Moto-Van!"

"That is true, but I am much fatigued. We will start very soon."

"All right. I am agreeable!"

They chatted for some moments, when suddenly Peregrine caught sight of an object in a dark corner of the hut. It caused him to jump back.

"Great Plato!" he gasped, "what does that mean?"

He went over and picked it up. It was a bleached human skull. The two explorers exchanged glances.

"That means," said Frank, confidently, "that the former occupant of this hut died here."

"And wild beasts came in and scattered the remains?"

"It is possible."

Further search resulted in the finding of other bones; in fact, nearly enough to make up the skeleton.

They were placed together, and the two explorers were commenting upon their peculiarities when a strange noise caused both to turn.

An astounding sight met their petrified gaze.

"Mercy!" uttered Frank.

"Great Caesar!" ejaculated Peregrine.

There was an excellent reason for these exclamations. The sight which they beheld was a terrifying one.

For there in the doorway of the hut was a huge head with

gleaming jaws and fierce eyes. A long, massive brown body extended back of it for fully a length of fifty feet.

It was a specimen of the horrible water python peculiar to the Orinoco and the Amazon, and larger than any other species in the world.

It was a savage creature, not hesitating to attack a man, and with awful jaws and powerful body, was a dreadful foe to face.

The reader can imagine the sensations of our adventurers. For a moment they were enchained.

There was no way of retreat.

The snake held the door, and the only course left the explorers was to fight or succumb.

The reptile itself had no idea of abandoning the field. It evidently was delighted with the prospective meal before it.

Perhaps it was responsible for the fate of the original occupant of the hut.

It began to glide forward, its ponderous body making the hut shake. Then Frank recovered.

"Look out, Peregrine!" he exclaimed. "Give him a shot. Take the right eye."

The professor with a spasmodic effort recovered.

"All right, Frank," he said, hoarsely, "here goes!"

He drew a hurried aim and fired. A fearful hiss went up, and the reptile reared its awful head aloft.

The bullet had missed the eye, but had drawn blood. Frank fired at the same moment.

His bullet went wide, and before either could fire again the reptile was upon them.

Frank had but one thought, and that was to avoid the tearing jaws of the monster. So he thrust the butt of his gun full into the reptile's throat.

It writhed, and its giant folds filled the hut and were about the two adventurers.

"Use the knife!" shouted Frank. "Cut and slash!"

But the professor needed no second bidding. He began hacking the monster body in twain, while Frank, still holding the rifle in its throat, rained blows with his knife against the scaly neck.

It was a terrific battle.

The two men were deluged in blood. Moreover, the snake gave out an overpowering sickening odor. This was hard to endure.

But the reptile was already mastered.

The loss of blood began to tell, and its struggles grew weaker.

At length Frank reached the vertebrae of the neck and ended the struggle.

Exhausted, the two explorers were hardly able to draw

them, live out of the hut and up the river bank. There they sat, panting, upon the carpet of the forest.

"Whew!" exclaimed Peregrine, after awhile; "I never was so badly used up in my life!"

"By Jove!" cried Frank; "that was the biggest snake I ever came across! I thought one while he'd get the best of us as sure as fate!"

"So did I!"

"You don't suppose he has a mate about here?"

"Whew!" cried the professor, "they do go in pairs. Let us get out of here as quickly as possible."

They went down to the water's edge, and washed some of the blood from their persons.

Then they started for the Van.

But darkness had come on with horrible swiftness, and almost in a twinkling, as it seemed, shut down about them.

Their position was one beyond description. It was utterly impossible to go ahead.

To be sure the river was there to guide them, but the banks were now lined with crocodiles and other reptiles.

The great forest was a Bedlam of savage cries. Wild beasts were roaming everywhere.

A thousand perils were upon every hand. At any moment they might be beset.

Both were brave men, but it was a position to make the stoutest heart tremble, but Frank Reade, Jr., was never without expedient.

"What on earth are we going to do?" asked Peregrine; "we surely can't stay here!"

"Nor can we go ahead."

"Certainly not through the forest. We would be sure to lose our way; but if we had a boat——"

"We have not. Were it not for the alligators we might try making a raft."

Frank finally decided upon what he considered his best move.

He collected a quantity of fagots and started a fire. Like beavers the two men worked to gather fuel.

It must last all night or their fate would be sealed. Nothing would keep the ravenous beasts away equal to fire.

The blaze was made in a semi-circle. The other part of the circle was the hollow of an eucalyptus tree.

And here the two men crouched, sleeping by turns and feeding the fire until after an interminable period daylight came.

It was with intense relief that they crept out of their cramped quarters into the sunlight.

Twittering birds were in the branches above. The alligators had deserted the sanded shore and the coast was clear.

Stretching their cramped limbs, the two explorers set out for the spot where they had left the Van.

"I wonder what Barney and Pomp will think?" cried Frank. "I'll wager they are worried a bit."

"I hope they will remain where they are."

"Have no fear of that."

They pressed on now with increased speed. Suddenly they came to a little stream which they had waded the day before.

The bottom was of clear sand, as were the shores. But Peregrine stopped and clutched Frank's arm.

"My soul!" he gasped; "do you see?"

"What?" exclaimed Frank.

"Look!"

The professor bent down and indicated some footprints in the sand.

They were of naked feet and unusual size. There were a large number of them.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Frank, and he stared at the foot-prints.

"They were not here yesterday," answered the professor, "for this is the very spot where we crossed."

"They have been this way since then," said Frank. "Of course they have seen the Moto-Van and doubtless paid it a visit."

"Just so," declared the professor.

"Forward then!"

They went on with all speed. It was a moment of intense excitement.

But at length the foliage cleared, and they saw before them the bluff which overlooked the Orinoco.

There was the very spot where the Moto-Van had been brought to a stop, but——

Both men stared at the spot aghast. Words can hardly express their sensations at that moment.

The Moto-Van was not there. It was gone.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO FAMOUS HUNTERS.

Barney and Pomp were right in their element. This holiday granted them so kindly they determined to make the most of.

Armed to the teeth, they slid down the bluff and started along the shore of the lagoon.

This was in an opposite direction from that taken by

Frank and the professor. But the quest of the two hunters was of a far different sort.

"Begorra, I'll bring back a hundred av thim foine ducks or none," declared Barney; "shure it's an ilegant shot I am. One time when I was up in the mountains av Ballyknuck, in the County of Fermaugh, I foired at a flock av eagles an' kilt sixteen av thim wid wan shot."

"Hol' on dar, chile," admonished Pomp. "Why, don' yo' say dat yo' fired sixteen times an' killed one eagle, sah?"

"Divil a bit do I care!" cried the free-hearted Irishman; "have it as ye will. Another toime I foired wan shot at twelve foine rabbits running down a hill and kilt thim all."

Pomp's eyes were like saucers.

"Wait jes' a bit, honey," he remonstrated. "Maybe yo' kin tell me how yo' shooted all dem rabbits wif one shot."

"To be shurely," replied Barney, lightly. "Yez see, the fust wan was in a single foile wid all the rist. Shure the bullet tuk him in the tail, an' passin' troo him an' out his nose, tuk ther next wan jest ther same, an' so on wid the whole twelve. Whist now, but I'm thinkin' it was a long ways fer that bullet to thravel, an' I moight not have got the lasht rabbit but that the bullet was thravellin' down hill."

Pomp winked hard and scratched his woolly head.

"Don' want to d'spute yo' wo'd, honey," he said; "but dat was jes' a drefful smaht shot."

"Wait till yez see me!" cried Barney, hilariously. "Shure I'm the dandy shot av this part av the worruld."

"Huh! jes' see if yo' kin hit dat big 'gator out dar."

"All roight, naygur."

Far out in the lagoon an immense alligator was sunning itself.

Barney took quick aim and fired.

The bullet caromed from the saurian's forehead and killed a heron on the other shore.

The 'gator disappeared.

Barney shot a look of triumph at Pomp.

The darky looked around and spied a big fish hawk an immense distance up in the air.

"Hol' on, chile!" he said.

He took quick aim and fired.

Down came the hawk almost at their feet. Its head was shot away.

Pomp stowed it away in his game bag, and these two crack shots went on.

They followed the lagoon for some miles, and then came to a covey of ducks. They crept up in the saw grass until they got a good line on them.

Then both fired.

So good was the shot that between them they had killed seven. But now a grave question arose.

There were the ducks far out on the surface of the lagoon. It is needless to say that they were quite beyond reach.

"Golly!" muttered Pomp, "how we ebber gwine to get dem ducks?"

Barney was stumped.

He loaded his rifle, and then after a few moments said:

"It's fer ye to shwim out there an' bring 'em in!"

Pomp stared at him.

"Huh!" he said; "nobody cud swim out dar an' back wifout a big 'gator chawin' ob him up!"

"I thought yez wor afraid," jeered Barney.

"Why don' yo' go yo'self?"

"I can't shwim that far."

"Huh! Yo' sink l'se gwine out dar?"

"How iver will we git the ducks thin, yez galoot?"

"I don' keer how you gits dem. Dis chile ain' no bo'n fool, an' yo' kin jes' bet on dat, sah. Shoot yo' ducks on de lan' nex' time."

And Pomp marched indignantly away. If there is one thing in the world a darky is afraid of it is an alligator.

Pomp began to study a shot at some monkeys in a tree near, and for a few moments his attention was diverted from his companion.

When he looked around he was given a stunning shock.

There was the Celt stripped and swimming the waters of the lagoon. He had almost reached the floating ducks.

The coon's blood turned cold as ice. He shook like a leaf.

"Fo' Hebben's sake, chile," he yelled, "wha' am yo' doin' down dere? Don' yo' kno' no bettah dan dat? De 'gators git yo' fo' suah!"

But Barney did not heed his cries if he heard them.

Pomp raved up and down the shore like a madman. He was sure the saurians would get the venturesome Celt.

And why they did not was a living wonder.

But for some reason or other unknown, they did not attack him. Either they did not see him or were not hungry.

The Celt actually made the distance out to the ducks and back in safety. Throwing the birds down on the sand, he blew the water out of his mouth and cried:

"Shure, if I had no more sand than yez have, naygur, I'd niver thravel in this part av the worruld."

Pomp could say nothing.

He was stupefied.

Barney dressed himself leisurely, and nonchalantly placed the ducks in his game bag.

"I hope yez will have luck, naygur," he said, coolly. "It's a good bag I have already."

"Hub! pah! ob dem ducks b'longs to me, chile!"

"Do they?"

"Didn't I shoot dem?"

"I reckon yez mought. But I'm the man thet got thim, an' possession's nine points av the law."

Pomp was completely outdone. He relapsed into moody silence. But pretty soon they came to another covey.

This time they shot six of the ducks. But Barney did not venture to swim for these. A raft was rigged with some trips from a cork tree, and on this Pomp floated out and recovered the birds.

Thus the two hunters went on down the lagoon for miles. They gave little heed to time, so interested were they in their pursuit.

So that it was late in the afternoon when they began to think of a return.

"Begorra, naygur!" cried Barney, "I'm afther thinkin' it'll be dark afore we git back."

"I fink we bettah start right now," said Pomp.

They were loaded down with birds. The expedition had been a great success. They started back at once.

For an hour they tramped on rapidly, then a startling thing happened.

Just at a bend in the lagoon shore Pomp shrank back, clutching Barney's arm. He trembled like an aspen.

"Phwat's the matther wid yez?" he asked.

"Golly, look out yender!"

A small section of the river's surface was visible here. Barney looked and his face paled.

On the river's surface was what looked like a huge war canoe of the Orinoco Indians.

It held nearly a score of armed natives. They were paddling up the current.

Barney and Pomp recognized a great danger at that moment.

Should these savages keep on as far as the bluff they could not help but catch sight of the Moto-Van. That they would attack it there was no doubt.

For a moment neither could act. They were at a loss what to do.

To continue along the shore would be to expose themselves to the view of the natives.

"Golly!" exclaimed Pomp, "I jes' hopes Marse Frank hab got back!"

"Oh, yez kin be shure av that," declared Barney, confidently. "Misther Frank is niver wantin'."

"Then I ain't gwine to be so 'fraid," said Pomp; "but I done fink de bes' fng we kin do is to git back dar jes' as quick as we eber kin!"

"Yez are roight, naygur. Jest yez folly me fer awhile."

Barney clambered up the bank and rushed on through the fringe of trees. In this way they were able to proceed unseen.

But the canoe got far ahead of them and was soon out of sight. It must reach the bluff before them.

Barney and Pomp had but one hope. This was that Frank and the professor had returned.

If they had not, then they would feel disposed to give up hope.

On they rushed at full speed. It seemed an age ere they came to the bluff.

It was nearly dark, but they saw the Moto-Van yet standing on the bluff.

There was a throng of natives about it, and some of them seemed to be engaged in digging away the face of the bluff.

"Tare an' ounds!" cried Barney. "Shure they're thrying to tumble it down into the river!"

"Wha' am Marse Frank?"

"Divil a bit do I know. But shure he's not there at all at all."

"Yo' am right. But Lor' bress yo', honey, we ain't gwine to stan' yere an' see dem topple dat ar masheen into dat ribber, is we?"

"Divil a bit!" cried Barney.

But before either could take action or say more, a loud fiendish yell went up from the natives.

The face of the bluff had yielded. Undermined, the Moto-Van pitched backward, and the next moment, as if out of a catapult, shot down into the river.

It went with a tremendous crash. But it struck right side up and floated intact.

None of the Indians, however, ventured near it, but allowed it to float away.

Experience had taught them that to lay hands upon the queer vehicle was to pay for it dearly. A few had received the shock from the dynamos.

The others, fearing to touch the mysterious vehicle, had devised the plan of sinking the Van in the river.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLDEN SPRING.

But the Moto-Van did not sink or even capsize. It struck fairly, righted itself and went on down the big river.

But though it had escaped destruction Barney and Pomp

were distracted to see the Van floating away beyond their reach.

They seemed powerless to check its course or recover it.

It would be folly to attempt to swim out to it. The chances against reaching it were enormous.

It looked dubious indeed. What was to be done?

There was no sense in picking up a conflict with the natives. Barney wisely concluded that it was better for them not to betray themselves.

So they hovered in the verge of the selvas, keeping dark, and this proved an easy thing to do.

For sudden darkness shut down over everything. It brought despair to the two jokers, for it was easy enough to see that the Moto-Van might drift an irreclaimable distance in that brief night.

They wanted to do something to save the Van. But there seemed nothing they could do.

"Begorra!" gasped Barney, "phwativer will Misther Frank say? He'll call us a lot av blockheads—no good!"

But the darkness became so intense that the two jokers were forced to abandon all plans for the time. They could only wait for daylight.

The savages held a jubilee dance on the mound or bluff and then continued on up the river in their canoe.

As soon as they had gone the two frightened hunters crept down near the water and proceeded to hold a council.

"Phwativer has come to Misther Frank an' ther purfessor?" asked Barney.

Pomp said quickly:

"I reckon I kin tell."

"Eh?" exclaimed the Celt.

"Dey jes' get belated in de woods same as we hav', an' dey got to stay away all night."

This was the logical conclusion arrived at. Then they began to consider seriously their own position.

It was certainly a serious one.

The cries of wild animals and the bellowing of the alligators frightened both nearly out of their wits.

It was a happy thought which led Barney to make a fire, and thus they camped down for the night, just as Frank and the professor had.

It seemed an age before morning came. Then the two tired hunters began to consider what it was best to do.

Pomp was in favor of building a raft and going down stream in quest of the Moto-Van.

"It kain't drift berry fast," he said, "an' dere ain' much current fo' to carry it along. I jes' fink we could catch it."

"Begorra, it wouldn't be roight to go away until Misther Frank returns," said Barney.

So it was decided to wait for the others. They had not long to wait.

Pomp chanced to glance up and saw two men on the bluff. He sprang up with a loud shout.

"Hi—hi! dere am Marse Frank now! Bress de Lor'!"

The astonishment of Frank and the professor at sight of Barney and Pomp could hardly be described.

They had guessed quite well how the Moto-Van had been precipitated into the river and by whom. But they had given Barney and Pomp up for lost.

Quick explanations followed.

"You are right, Pomp," declared Frank, "there is no reason why we should not recover the Van. I cannot see how harm can come to her, for there are no rapids between here and the sea."

"But the natives," said Peregrine.

"You forget. The rail of the Van is heavily charged by the dynamos. They could never board her!"

"Good! let us go after it at once then!"

There was better material for a raft on the shore of the lagoon. So all started thither.

And this led to a welcome discovery. Just as they came in sight of the lagoon, Frank cried:

"On my word, there is the Van now!"

This was seen to be the truth.

The eddying, sluggish current had carried the Moto-Van into the mouth of the lagoon. There it rested, nterly becalmed in those sluggish waters.

Some herons had taken possession of the pilot-house deck.

But how was the Van to be brought back to the shore? How were the voyagers to get out to her?

There were two ways. To swim or build a raft.

Barney volunteered to swim, but Frank would not let him. So all fell to work building a raft.

It did not take very long. Many hands made light work, and within an hour the raft was launched.

It was paddled safely to the side of the Van.

Taking care not to come in contact with the heavily charged rail, Frank clambered aboard. His first move was to discharge the current from the rail.

Then the others came aboard. The paddles were run out and the Van was turned about.

Up the stream she paddled valiantly to a good landing place. Once more ashore, our voyagers were again in high feather.

They had come out of their thrilling experiences quite intact. After all, it was that sort of thing which gave zest to the undertaking.

Once more the Moto Van plunged into the great forest

To-day this was threaded, always following the course of the Orinoco.

Minor incidents of a light character befell the party. But a week passed before any serious mishap occurred. They were now working well down toward the high cataract of the Orinoco.

A mountainous region would then be encountered, and the scenery would undergo a great change.

Already Mount Dinda, of the Parima Range, could be dimly descried far to the south.

The Orinoco ran around the very base of this mountain, which was eighty-five hundred feet high.

Here the river turned, and to follow its course one would have to go to the eastward, for the river ran due west.

Another week of hard traveling brought the voyagers to the base of this mountain.

They now left the dark selvas eternally behind them, and it might be truly said that they were not wholly sorry. The country now presented an open and more encouraging aspect.

There were fertile plains and rich uplands. Babbling brooks and cooling springs.

"Here is the region for gold!" cried Frank, enthusiastically. "I will wager my life on it. The soil is very auriferous."

"That is true!" agreed the professor. "I have almost got the fever!"

One day they camped in a little pass, at the head of which, full sixty miles away, they saw the summit of Mount Maravoca.

It was a delightful green spot on the mountain side. A cooling spring gushed from beneath a rock near by.

"That water looks too tempting," said the professor; "I am going to try a drink of it."

"Good!" cried Frank, "bring me a cup of it."

"I will do so."

The professor reached the spring and dipped up some of the water. As he did so he saw something glittering in the bubbling sands.

He stopped in the act of drinking and forgot his thirst. He reached down and took up a handful of the sand.

It was but a moment's work to turn it over in his hand.

Then he cried excitedly:

"Gold! oceans of it!"

For a moment the scientist was very much excited. Then he turned and beckoned to Frank.

The discovery of gold always creates a fever in the breast of man, even though he be blessed with a superabundance of the world's good.

In a moment Frank was by the side of the scientist, and the two men were actively engaged in digging out the spring.

All along the rivulet which led from it signs of gold were found. In fact the soil all about the place held the precious ore.

Frank had heard much of the gold fields of Venezuela and Guiana. But he had never believed that it lay so openly on the surface as this.

"Why," he declared, "there must be millions of dollars in this hillside. We might stake out a claim here and start a city if it was only in the United States."

"You are right," agreed the professor. "And it would not be so very difficult to wash out quite a little fortune here for ourselves."

"Have you the fever?" asked Frank.

"I own that I have!"

"Well, we will stay here a few days if you desire. I believe I have some chemicals and a racker on board the Van. We will become miners for a time."

"Good!" cried Peregrine, "it will also enable me to add to my geological collection!"

The professor entered into the project with vim. Even Barney and Pomp did a little placer mining on their own account.

It was fascinating diversion, as the reader may well imagine, and made occupation for the travelers for a number of days.

In that space of time they had succeeded in extracting a number of thousand dollars' worth of the precious metal from the soil.

This was stowed away in bags aboard the Moto-Van. Four days had thus been spent when an exciting incident occurred.

Frank was indulging in a siesta on the pilot-house deck under an awning. Barney was polishing brass, and Pomp was in the cooking galley.

The professor was washing gold.

Suddenly the thud of horses' hoofs was heard. Frank started up and gave a little cry of astonishment.

A score of mounted men were about the vehicle. They had just ridden out of the mountain pass.

They rode the tough wiry little horses peculiar to Venezuela. They were swarthy, rough-looking men and genuine types of the Gringo. Their manner did not appear altogether friendly.

Frank scented mischief.

The horsemen looked like bandits.

He knew the visit boded no good.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BOUNDARY POLICE.

The professor dropped his mining tools and came toward the Moto-Van. To his amazement, and that of Frank as well, the leader of the horsemen reined his horse in front of him.

In a surly tone he cried in the Spanish tongue:

"Dog of an Englishman! what do you here?"

"Eh?" exclaimed Peregrine somewhat tartly. "Who are you?"

A Spanish oath was the reply.

"We are loyal citizens of Bolivar," returned the horseman. "We demand the gold you have taken from our soil."

Peregrine's temper arose at once.

"Well, you won't get it!" he replied, defiantly. "I can tell you that, sir! Gold, when found in such a wilderness as this, is the lawful property of the finder."

"That may be English law," replied the Gringo, "but it won't work here in Venezuela. We know you Johnny Bulls right well. You'll steal anything on top of the earth. Everybody knows that our boundary line should be the Essequibo River, while you claim the Orinoco."

Light flashed across the minds of both the professor and Frank Reade, Jr., at that moment.

It was evident that these Venezuelans had mistaken them for Englishmen.

Now the state of feeling in regard to the boundary line between British Guiana and Venezuela was well known. The Gringos and the British settlers were in a constant state of warfare.

Frank saw at once that it was easy to appease the Gringos by the announcement that they were Americans.

So he cried:

"You don't like your English neighbors?"

"Why should we?" retorted the leader of the band; "they have usurped our most valuable rights, have laid claim to our best gold mines and are trying to force us beyond the Orinoco."

"Well," said Frank, quietly, "that has nothing to do with us."

"It has everything to do with you, for you are digging gold on our land, which you have no right to do."

"You are mistaken," said Frank in the same quiet manner; "we are not the characters you take us for. Venezuela has no warmer friend than the Americans."

The Gringo's manner changed.

"Live the Americans!" shouted the troop. "Live Washington! Live Bolivar!"

"You are not Americans?" asked the leader in surprise.

"We are," replied Frank, "and warm friends of your people."

The Gringo leader doffed his sombrero and bowed low.

"If that is true," he cried, "you shall keep the gold! America and Venezuela are one. We are brothers. Venezuela owes a great debt to Uncle Sam."

Then with a tinge of distrust in his voice:

"You have passports?"

"Here they are!"

Frank produced the passports and showed them to the Gringo. His manner instantly changed.

"I am glad to meet you and your friends, Senor Reade," he declared. "I am Lieutenant Gabriel San Bonita, of the government service. We are mounted guards for the boundary, and it is our duty to prevent British pilferers from coming over here to dig our gold."

"I am glad to meet you," declared Frank.

Then he detailed the story of their great trip along the Orinoco. San Bonita was delighted.

In a very short while all were upon the best of terms. The mounted guard came down from their horses, and Frank treated them to wine and food.

From San Bonita, Frank learned that they were not far from the Brazilian boundary, as well as that of British Guiana.

"But our country hopes to get its rights some time," declared San Bonita, "through the good offices of the United States."

"If your claims are just Uncle Sam will stand by you, be sure!" said Frank.

A map was produced, and San Bonita gave Frank much valuable information about the course which he intended to take.

"But Raraima, the wonderland," he said, "is only partly in Venezuela, Senor Reade. A large portion of it lies in British Guiana. But for that matter there will be no molestation, for I doubt if you will find a single white man in that whole region at this moment."

"Indeed!" said Frank, in surprise, "it must be inaccessible."

"It is quite so unless one has a base of supplies. Without doubt upon those mighty piteans one might find the means of sustenance, but to get up there is a feat never yet accomplished."

"Then the region about is rather barren and desolate?"

"Extremely so. Even wild animals seem to have forsaken

"There are sections which it would be difficult for man or beast to traverse without starvation."

"Indeed!"

"But in your case it is very different. You probably have provisions in plenty aboard your wagon."

"Yes."

"Then you will experience no trouble. I wish you a pleasant trip, seniors. Adios."

The lieutenant mounted, as did the rest of his company. They rode away slowly under the boiling sun.

"Well," said the professor, after they had gone. "What do you think of visiting Raraima, Frank?"

"We will go there!" said the young inventor, "but whether we can succeed in reaching the tops of the plateaus or not, I cannot say."

"Perhaps we can devise a plan!"

"We will try!"

"Shall we start to-day?"

"If you are done washing gold."

"I am quite done!"

"Very well. We will start this hour."

All effects were packed aboard the Moto-Van, and the spring of gold and its unlimited treasures were left behind.

They were now journeying along the northern base of the Parima Mountains.

These formed the boundary line between Venezuela and Brazil. And they served the purpose well.

For in most places they were inaccessible steep. In fact, the great cliffs and peaks had all the appearance of towers and battlements.

"If Venezuela and Brazil were to go to war," said Peregrine, "they would never need to build forts. Just equip those heights with heavy cannon and Gibraltar would be outdone."

"You are right," agreed Frank: "but the great wars of the future will be conducted on the seas."

"Do you believe that?"

"I do!"

The professor was not in a mood to dispute Frank. He reflected upon the mighty navies of the world and realized the logic of this statement.

Barney and Pomp had amassed quite a respectable fortune from the gold diggings. They were enthusiastic over Venezuela.

"It's a mighty hot place," said Barney; "but barrin' the heat it's as fine a place as I ever visited!"

"Golly! I don't keer how hot it am," cried Pomp; "it ain't beat old Kyarlne in de hot season, I jes' reckon. I likes it, I does."

The Van now rolled on through a picturesque region.

The Parima range upon the south presented a tremendously grand aspect. Upon the other hand extended a plain, green, fertile and as level as a floor.

Over this the Van bowled merrily; it was a delightful experience.

Thus far the weather had been of a torrid description, fully characteristic of the tropics.

But now the sky began to assume a brassy appearance, and the sun looked like a misty circle of smoked glass. It needed no other phenomena to assure Frank and Peregrine that a storm was in near prospect.

And a storm in the tropics is generally a matter of some concern. It very often assumes the form of a destructive hurricane.

"Looks a little like trouble overhead," remarked Peregrine.

"Yes," agreed Frank, "I think we are likely to have a storm."

"Had we not better seek cover somewhere?"

"I have an eye out for a place," said Frank. "Perhaps we can find a hole in some of these cliffs."

"There," cried Peregrine; "there is a likely place yonder. It is a cleft in the mountain wall. Will we not be secluded there?"

"It looks like just the place for us," replied Frank; "let us go thither."

And the Van was turned in that direction. In a few moments it was upon the point of entering the cleft.

It was a sheltered spot, and the voyagers could certainly have avoided the force of the gale there. But at that moment a thought came to Frank.

He saw that a little stream trickled down through the place. The walls looked worn and smooth as if from the action of water.

He stopped the machine.

"What is the matter, Frank?" asked Peregrine, in surprise.

"I don't believe we had better risk staying here," said Frank.

"Why not?"

"It looks to me as if the storm was in the habit of making a water course of this defile. Very likely a raging torrent will fill it."

"By Plato, you are right, Frank!" exclaimed the professor. "I never thought of that at all. It won't do to stay here a moment."

Back down the green slope the machine ran. And at that moment a distant sullen booming was heard.

"The storm is coming!" cried Peregrine. "We must make haste."

Hastily the adventurers now looked for a place of refuge. But none seemed to offer.

Frank drew back the lever and let the machine run at full speed along the base of the mountain. To the north was the mighty level plain.

It would never do to go there. The place to seek refuge was in the hills.

On ran the Van at a terrific rate of speed. Down the valley swifter yet rolled a wall of mist.

It was hot and suffocating like steam. In a moment it spread down around the Van in a mighty impenetrable veil of gloom.

It was madness to attempt to run ahead at such speed now, for not an object could be seen on either side. Frank was compelled to come to a dead stop.

CHAPTER X.

THE BRITISH FLAG.

It would have been madness to attempt to go ahead in such a dense fog.

Obstacles were legion, and a collision might mean the destruction of the Moto-Van.

So Frank brought it to a complete stop. Then the voyagers all looked blankly at each other.

What was to be done?

"Begorra, I niver see sich a fog, even in ould Oireland!" declared Barney.

"Golly! I done fink it am laike a reg'lar Georgy swamp mist," said Pomp.

"It came down so sudden," commented Frank.

"But it will go more sudden," declared the professor. "The moment the storm strikes us it will vanish in a whiff. Then—we shall be in a bad strait in this open place."

Frank knew this was so.

The powerful hurricane would lift the Van like a feather and perhaps utterly destroy it. But what could be done to avoid this?

To attempt to anchor it would be apparent folly. To seek a place of shelter now in the fog seemed impossible.

Truly the situation was a desperate one, and every moment was valuable.

Already the hot mist was beginning to surge. A distant awful booming was heard.

"The storm is coming!" cried Peregrine.

Frank was in one frenzied moment the victim of despair. Then he acted upon a sudden and daring move.

He knew that to climb up the mountain side in the mist would be madness. He had seen a ship at sea run before a gale until the gale had outstripped it.

It seemed to him that this was now the only course left to him.

So, with sudden impulse, he headed the machine out across the plain, and pulled the lever wide open.

The electric engines responded nobly, the machine leaped forward. In the whirling wall of mist he could not see where he was going.

But he knew that the plain was level and smooth. There were few obstacles upon it.

Peregrine, pallid as death, clutched his arm.

"My soul! Where are you going, Frank?" he whispered.

"To outrun the gale, if I can," replied the young inventor.

"Across the plain?"

"Yes!"

"But—if we strike anything——"

"We must chance it!"

Not another word was spoken. It seemed to the voyagers as if they were flying on the wings of the wind.

Peregrine saw a minute tick around on the chronometer. It seemed to him an age.

Then the furies of a literal hades raved about the machine. The storm had burst.

The hot mist vanished as if by magic, and the air instantly became chill. Rain and wind howled about the machine like a mighty whirlwind.

It seemed at times as if it must be overturned. But Frank's iron hand at the wheel steadied it.

On and on with maddening speed the machine ran. Still the hurricane pursued.

One—two—four—eight—fifteen minutes were recorded

by the chronometer. It could not last much longer. Twenty minutes was the average life of these storms.

The professor clung to Frank's arm. Suddenly there came a lull. The mist was swept up a little ahead and a thrilling sight was revealed.

There dead ahead was a broad river, its banks swollen by the flood. Straight toward it they were flying.

"We are lost!" shrieked Peregrine; "we shall go into that river."

"It won't hurt us!" gritted Frank; "not unless we capsize."

Frank, however, jammed the lever back and checked speed. The next moment the machine shot into the river.

Of course it went below the surface, but came up like a cork.

It floated on the swift rushing current and was swept down stream with great speed.

Of course there was nothing for the voyagers to do but to hang on. What the outcome would be they could only guess.

But they hoped for the best.

If the machine struck a series of rapids, or was sent over a cataract, then all would be ended. But it did not come to that.

It was the last mighty effort of the storm.

The next moment the wind ceased its force, the rain gusts stopped, and the great wall of mist rolled away to the northward.

The storm was over.

In a few moments the sun burst forth again and our voyagers looked out upon a curious scene.

The river, upon the surface of which they were at that moment, was swollen above its banks.

It ran through the great plain which was now glistening with the rainfall. Upon either hand the same level country extended.

The Parima range of mountains was scarcely visible to the southward. The Van must have run a long distance before the storm.

Frank threw out the paddles and steered the Van to the shore. Out of the water the machine emerged like a duck, all dripping and wet.

The voyagers could truly congratulate themselves upon a very narrow escape from a serious calamity, if not death.

The machine was badly shaken up and there was nothing for it but to camp on the spot.

This was done and all retired much fatigued. A refreshing night's rest, however, proved a restorative.

The next morning Frank started the Van ahead, going directly eastward. The Parima mountains here described a semi-circle, and he knew that he would strike the range again at a point further on.

On bowled the machine at a lively rate.

Finally they again found themselves at the base of the Parimas. But here Frank caught sight of an object which caused him to check the speed of the machine.

Far upon the mountain slope there was a tall pole, and on it hung a flag.

Frank and the professor studied it a moment, and then rubbed their eyes as if they had not seen straight.

"Great Cicero!" ejaculated Peregrine. "What do you make it out to be, Frank? It is not a Spanish flag."

"No," replied the young inventor, drawing a deep breath, "it is an English Jack!"

They exchanged glances.

"Why, we're not off our reckoning so much as that?" asked Peregrine. "Are we in Guiana?"

"We are in Venezuela!"

"How then can the British flag wave here?"

Frank shook his head gravely.

"If Bonita and his men were here now," he said, "I fear there would be trouble. They are probably a band of British prospectors and fancy that they are on British soil."

"In that case," said Peregrine, "ought we not to warn them?"

"Humph! it is hardly likely they would believe us. However, I am inclined to pay the spot a visit."

"Do by all means!"

Frank at once headed the machine up the green slope. In a short while they came upon a little level shelf of land which was backed by the mountain wall.

Here were the hastily erected cabins of the prospectors. A score of rough men were seen at work in a ditch. A number of donkeys grazed near by.

It was truly a prospectors' camp.

The miners probably had crossed the mountains from Guiana and had made a rich discovery.

They were delving for the yellow metal with much energy. As the Van appeared, however, a sensation was created.

Instantly all the miners dropped their shovels and pans and rushed out with rifles in their hands. It was evident that they were upon the defensive.

"That looks suspicious," said Peregrine. "They seem to know that they are doing what they ought not to."

"That is so," agreed Frank. "Let us open a parley."

Frank opened the pilot-house window and hailed them. An answer came instantly back.

"Who are you and what do you want here?"

"We are American travelers," replied Frank; "have no fear. We are not foes."

The American flag floated above the pilot-house, so that this could not be disputed. At once the interloping miners were reassured.

A number of them came forward.

That they were Englishmen could be seen at a glance. The leader, a powerful fellow, dressed in Scotch plaid made a low bow and said:

"Good day to you, gentlemen. How do you manage to travel in that sort of coach without horses?"

The fellow introduced himself as Roger Throckmorton, from Demerara, and openly admitted that they were gold hunters.

Frank explained the Moto-Van to the miners to their great curiosity, and Throckmorton said:

"You Yankees can't be beat for new-fangled ideas. Who the deuce would ever think of getting up such a rig as that? Why, man, in London you could make your fortune putting that and yourself on exhibition."

"No doubt," replied Frank; "but I don't want the fortune bad enough. But look here, my friends—are you not doing a bit of trespassing?"

"Eh?" exclaimed Throckmorton, flushing a bit. "What do you mean?"

"This is supposed to be Venezuelan soil, is it not?"

"Pshaw! we don't admit that. We go by the Schomburgk line. This is bound to belong to England."

"I fear you would have trouble if the Spanish discovered you here," said Frank. "We met quite a little body of boundary police above here a ways."

Throckmorton gave a start.

"The deuce you did!" he exclaimed. "Eh, what's that? Are those the chaps?"

Throckmorton pointed to the verge of the plateau. A body of armed men had appeared there. It was very easy to recognize them as San Bonita's men, and the Venezuelan lieutenant was at their head.

CHAPTER XI

HOW FRANK SETTLED AN INTERNATIONAL DISPUTE.

For a moment Frank felt every vein in his body tingle. It was a thrilling situation, in truth.

What had brought San Bonita and his men back to the spot was a mystery. It looked like fate.

Throckmorton and his men instinctively clutched their rifles. The Venezuelans were coming on at a masterly gallop.

A collision was certain.

Frank cudgelled his brain for some way of averting it.

"Yes, yes," he cried, hastily, to the English prospector. "these are Venezuelan police; there will be trouble. Flee for your lives!"

But Throckmorton only shrugged his giant shoulders and grinned.

"The time has not come yet," he said, grimly, "for a Briton to turn heels to a Gringo. Condemn their skins, if they get uppish with us they will get into hot water!"

"But they believe you to be interlopers!" cried Frank: "it will certainly bring about a calamity, I warn you."

"Pshaw!" declared the cool Englishman. "You needn't be afraid of Venezuela getting into any international difficulty with England. It would cost her a little too much. You shall see how I will bluff these gay Gringos."

San Bonita, at the head of his men, was much excited. He pointed to the British flag and cried:

"Down with that flag! It has no right on Venezuelan soil. Pull it down, I say?"

With loud shouts two of the Gringos started to execute

this order. But Throckmorton in a voice of thunder shouted:

"Hold! the man who puts a hand on that flag dies!"

The Gringos instinctively paused. Instantly San Bonita sprung from his horse and confronted the giant prospector.

The Venezuelan's face was flame red. His hand was upon his sword hilt.

"By what right do you fly an English flag here, sir?" he asked, with keen and cutting emphasis; "this is an affront to our government."

"Your government?" said Throckmorton, coolly; "pray, what is your government?"

"The State of Venezuela, which owns every foot of this land."

"What!" exclaimed the finical Englishman, "do you mean to say that this is really Venezuelan soil?"

"I do!" replied Bonita, sternly.

"Well, that is new to me!" said Throckmorton, sardonically. "I believe that this land is very much in dispute at present. Our English government also claims it. Until that dispute is settled, in what is it yours more than ours?"

Bonita fumed with rage.

"It is Venezuelan soil," he declared. "Venezuela does not admit the British claim."

"Oh, she does not, eh? Why, then, is she willing to arbitrate?"

"I am informed by good authority that there will be no arbitration only in favor of Venezuela," replied Bonita with dignity. "In any case you have no right to come here and plant your flag."

"As good a right as you!"

"On that point we differ."

"Well, allowing that we differ, what are you going to do about it?"

"I am going to pull down that flag and warn you to go back across the line. Without passports you will be liable to arrest."

Throckmorton bit his lip.

"You are riding a high horse, Gringo," he said. "Now let me tell you a story. Suppose you insult that flag? It is backed by the strongest government in the world, which could crush Venezuela without a tremor. Your president would be notified of the insult and indemnity de-

manded. In the event of defiance warships would batter down the very mountains about Caracas. Where would your government be then?"

Bonita's face was crimson.

"Dog!" he hissed. "Do you think that a Venezuelan knows fear? Do you think that your cowardly, bullying government could carry out such a programme? Is Venezuela without friends? The very moment that your destroying warship appeared in front of Caracas she would find an American man-of-war there to meet her. In union there is strength, and every government in this western hemisphere will join hands against the despots of the East."

Throckmorton's face was livid. It was a telling shot.

"Humph!" he sneered. "Where are Uncle Sam's ships? A mushroom navy! Why, one of the Queen's Thunderers would put his whole navy to sleep."

This was crowding upon Frank's toes. The young inventor had intended to remain neutral. But color leaped into his face, and he said:

"This is an example of the traditional hatred of England for America. If you have such confidence in your superior power, Mr. Throckmorton, why does not your government take up the gauntlet which Uncle Sam has thrown down for you many a time?"

"You can thank your stars that we have not," said Throckmorton, stiffly, "but the time is coming when England will give you Yankees a licking you won't forget."

"It is quite good of your people to forbear," said Frank, with a caustic smile. "Meanwhile we shall shiver in anticipation of that whipping."

"You'll get it, never fear," growled Throckmorton; "but I can see that you are inclined to side with these low-lived Gringos. Anything to work against England. Perhaps you would like to pull down that flag yourself?" he sneered.

"It is my opinion that until the boundary dispute is settled it has no right to wave here," said Frank, resolutely.

Throckmorton's face turned black.

"Do you mean that?" he hissed.

"I do!"

He glared at Frank savagely a moment. Then he turned ungraciously about, snarling:

"Well, it will remain here and continue to wave!"

Frank was almost sorry that he had heeded the rascal's

words in the first place. He could already see the inconvenience of being drawn into the dispute as well as the possible bad taste, for his disposition was to act rather as a mediator.

But Throckmorton's words and bullying manner was extremely irritating, and so well convinced was the young inventor that he was wrong in his position that his own natural love of fair play would assert itself.

Throckmorton had turned about, but Bonita said, sharply:

"Pardon, Senor Englishman. What am I to do about the flag? I will allow you to pull it down yourself if you choose."

"Never!" yelled Throckmorton; "and the man who attempts to so insult the Queen shall pay for it with his life!"

Bonita unsheathed his sword and spoke to his men, who closed in behind him. Then he started for the flagstaff.

He caught Frank's eye and the young inventor said:

"Do not get in too deep."

"I would be untrue to my trust and my country if I did not sacrifice my life if need be in her honor."

"He is right," said Peregrine, to Frank. "Actually I'm afraid there will be trouble, Frank."

It certainly looked like it.

Throckmorton held his rifle ready for use. For a moment Frank was in a dilemma. What could he do?

He hated to see Bonita lose his life. On the other hand, he knew that his interference might mean an international affair.

While in this momentary quandary a sudden daring plan suggested itself. Fear of consequences was overruled.

He knew that if Bonita placed a hand upon the flag pole that moment Throckmorton would shoot him. Then would surely follow bloodshed.

"Get aboard, Peregrine, quick!" he said. "I've got a plan."

The professor lost no time.

Neither did Frank.

Both sprung into the Van. Then Frank went forward to the electric gun.

Quick as a flash he placed a shell in the breech. He aimed dead for the flag pole.

The work of the electric gun was silent. But the shell

struck the flag pole and there was a terrific roar. It fell, and with it the English colors.

It is fair to say that Bonita and his men were fully as astonished as the Englishmen. They paused in utter stupefaction.

Neither the Venezuelan nor the Englishman believed that there was a gun capable of throwing such a shell aboard the Moto-Van. They did not once think of the shot as coming from there.

Where had it come from? There was no sign of artillery in the vicinity, nor anything to explain its possible presence there.

The execution done by the dynamite shell was something terrific. The flag pole was not only uprooted, but a hole large enough to bury a dozen men was blown out of the earth under it.

However, one of Throckmorton's men had seen the actions of Frank Reade, Jr., in discharging the gun. He at once told the English prospector.

Throckmorton's face was livid.

He instantly shouted to his men.

"To arms every one of ye! I'll hang those Yankees for this if I die for it next moment."

With a cheer the score of prospectors sprung from their ditch. But Frank was ready for them.

He was determined to make it a bloodless battle if he could. His one desperate plan was to overawe the combatants.

So he fired a shell at the base of a huge stone, behind which the Englishmen were advancing. There was a shock like an earthquake, and it was instantly reduced to powder.

Even Throckmorton paused in fear and wonderment.

Then Frank shouted:

"Consider well what you do! I have a deadly electric gun here, with which I could destroy your whole navy, Sir Throckmorton. I might wipe you all out of existence, and the world would never be the wiser for it."

Throckmorton's spirit was cowed. He trembled like a leaf.

It was easy for him to see that Frank spoke the truth. Yet he burned for vengeance. However, he could never hope to gain it if he sacrificed his life needlessly now.

So he stifled his hatred and rage and cried:

"What right have you to shoot down her majesty's flag in that way? You will pay for it!"

"Tut, tut!" said Frank. "I did it to avoid a collision between you and Bonita. There would have been bloodshed if I had not done so."

"There will be in any event," cried the enraged Britisher. "Fire on the accursed Gringos, boys!"

"Ready arms!" cried San Bonita.

But Frank shouted:

"Hold! Fire one shot, and I'll sweep you all from the face of the earth. There shall be no fighting here. Let this affair end!"

"Then you dare our government?" hissed Throckmorton. "You will take the consequences of making this affair international?"

"I will!" declared Frank. "And fair-minded men will back me up. Now as for you, Mr. Throckmorton, you are on Venezuelan soil without passports. The best thing you can do is to retire to the other side of the line. There will be surely trouble if you stay here."

The Englishman was white with fury.

"I will not go!" he said.

"Very well," said Frank, placing a shell in the electric gun, "there is but one course left for me to prevent a fight. I must wipe you all out of existence."

"You don't dare do that."

"You shall see. I bid you pick up your traps and leave within thirty minutes!"

Throckmorton raved and cursed. Then he accepted discretion as the better part of valor.

For he was outnumbered.

The Englishmen packed their camp and retired beyond the mountain range. When the last one was out of sight Frank turned and said:

"My case was strong, and I knew it. In the first place the English government would never sanction these rascals trespassing here. Throckmorton knows it and would never dare make a complaint."

"Senor Reade," said Bonita, with shining eyes. "You are our friend! We will not forget you!"

"It was simply to settle the dispute," laughed Frank: "that is the best victory I ever won, and the best of it is it was a bloodless one."

Once more the voyagers bade farewell to the Venezuelan and resumed the journey to Raraima. This was not so very far off now.

CHAPTER XII.

A CALAMITY—THE END.

The Moto-Van bowled on up the Parima Valley. They were now drawing hourly nearer the wonderland.

But Frank had been doing some serious thinking.

The Van had traveled a good ways, and suffered great wear and tear. In fact, it was not difficult to see that it was literally wearing out.

Not only were the wheels growing weak, but the shell and the running gear were getting shaky.

The same rate of speed could not be maintained as at first.

When it was recalled that the machine had undergone some terribly rough experiences, this was not greatly to be wondered at.

Frank consulted with the professor upon this point.

"We have been fully six weeks in this region," he said, "and during this time we have done little but bump over rough ground or scrape our way through rough forests, and navigate rivers and lagoons. The machine has been subjected to a twisting and wrenching, such as no ordinary vehicle could stand."

"Ah!" said Peregrine, "it would be well to make some repairs before going further."

"There is the trouble," said Frank. "I fear that is going to be impossible. You see worn out material has to be replaced. We have not the stock to do that with."

The professor's face fell.

"That is bad," he said: "is there any immediate danger of the machine giving out?"

"Perhaps not an immediate danger," replied Frank.

"What then ought we to do?"

"I have a proposition to make. It seems to me that we are going to do well if we make Ciudad Bolivar with the Moto-Van. That is almost due north from here."

Peregrine looked disappointed.

"What?" he exclaimed, "give up our exploration of the wonderland?"

Frank inclined his head.

"That would be too bad," said Peregrine, bitterly; "that was the prime object of our coming to Venezuela."

"Very true," agreed Frank. "And I would not hinder it were it not for imperative necessity."

"Then you consider it an imperative necessity, do you?"

"I do."

Peregrine could not master his keen disappointment. Seeing this, Frank said:

"But for all that, the project need not be wholly abandoned."

Peregrine raised his head eagerly.

He was very much relieved.

"Ah!" he cried. "How can it be consummated safely?"

"We can come to Venezuela at some future time, if nothing occurs to prevent. We may then make the exploration of the wonderland a special matter."

"But we are here now," said Peregrine, "and that is half the battle. I am an old man, and the future is an uncertainty for me."

"Yet can you consider it practicable to explore Raraima now?" asked Frank. "You know that if the machine should give out we would be obliged to leave it, and that would give us many hundreds of miles through a terrible wilderness to travel on foot. We could hardly hope to make it without loss of life."

Peregrine was not an obstinate man. He could not help but see that Frank was in the main right.

Of course it was a bitter disappointment to him. But after all life is largely made up of such things. So he finally said:

"Frank, I believe you are right. We will do well to reach Angostura."

The course of the Moto-Van was at once changed. Barney and Pomp were not sorry.

They had baked for many weeks in the tropical sun, and the prospect of getting home was by no means an unwelcome one.

The region between them and Ciudad Bolivar was a wild and uncultured one.

But most of the way it consisted of level plains, where the machine could run at a good speed.

They passed within fair view of the great elevated plateau of Raraima, visible nearly sixty miles to the southward.

It was a great temptation to Frank to proceed thither at once, but his better sense prevailed, and he did not do so. The Moto-Van kept on her northern course.

"We will make a visit to Raraima at some future day," he declared.

"Then if I am alive I beg you will include me in the party," said Peregrine.

"I will most certainly do so," agreed Frank.

Days passed without any thrilling incident. The great wilderness began to vanish in their rear.

They were nearing civilization.

Then the voyagers came to evidences of settlement. One day they ran upon a party of Gringo drovers.

Constant surveillance was required to graze cattle in these wilds for fear of wild beasts.

Whenever the native Venezuelans were met, they treated the American travelers with marked distinction.

"The Americans are our friends," they declared. "We will never be untrue to them."

Still northward the machine ran. Now threading a jungle or forest, winding through a mountain pass or ferrying a river or lake.

Small frontier towns became common, and at length they came to a wide stream which was a confluent of the Orinoco.

"We are only fifty miles from Ciudad Bolivar," declared Frank, joyfully. "We shall soon be there."

Progress for the first few days had been painfully slow.

The Moto-Van was fast giving out. She could scarcely maintain a speed of four or five miles an hour.

Like the deacon's "one hoss shay," she seemed likely to go to pieces "all at once." Great care was necessary.

"Let us get her to Ciudad," said Frank, "then we will place her aboard the steamer and ask no more of her."

"She ought to go fifty miles further," said Peregrine.

"Oh, yes, I think she will do that easily. Now to cross the river."

The current was moderately swift, there being some rapid, half a mile below. The distance across was two hundred yards.

Frank ran the machine into the water and threw out the paddles. All of her passengers noticed a peculiar motion.

But she paddled half way across the river when a sudden jarring sound was heard from the cabin.

"What is that?" exclaimed Peregrine in alarm.

Frank started up, but at that moment Barney came rushing out of the pilot-house.

"Misther Frank," he cried, "shure the driving bar at the hind axle has broke an' pinched a hole in the shell at the Van, sor, an' the wather is coming in loike a flood."

"Mercy on us!" cried the young inventor; "she will sink! Put on all speed, Barney."

"Shure, sor, the machinery won't work now at all at all!"

This was true enough, as might have been expected. The Van floated helplessly in the current.

And while the water was pouring into her she was drifting down toward the rapids.

There was no saving her, as Frank at once saw. She was doomed never to return to America.

Realizing this, the young inventor saw that self preservation was the next thing to consider.

"There is only one chance for us," he cried. "We must swim for it. Barney and Pomp, you can easily make it. Come, professor, I'll assist you."

"Not a bit of it," cried Peregrine, throwing off his coat. "I am a regular water duck. I can take care of myself. Lead the way!"

And over the rail all sprung. They were none too soon. The next moment the Moto-Van sunk.

There had been no time to save any effects. All had come like a flash. There could be only one thought, and that was the preservation of life.

It was lucky for the voyagers that they encountered no alligators. They made the shore safely, and crawling out, sank down in the hot sand.

Then they had leisure to ruminate upon the catastrophe, and at the same time wring the water out of their clothes.

For some while all were much depressed: Many valuable effects had gone down with the Van.

Of course there might have been a possibility of resurrecting these. But it would be a difficult task, and all concluded not to attempt it.

Their situation, however, was not of the worst.

To be sure they were fifty miles from Ciudad Bolivar, but there were plantations not far distant where they might hope to obtain horses.

"Well," said Frank with a deep breath. "What I had feared has happened. It is very lucky for us that we are not away down there in the Raraima region."

"You are right, Frank," said Peregrine. "Your judgment was sound. It is well that we acted upon it. But I deeply regret the loss of the Van!"

"Well, so do I."

"It was a marvelous invention."

"Yes!" agreed Frank, "the Moto-Van was very well constructed, but the next vehicle I build will be a better one!"

"Will you construct another soon?" asked Peregrine, eagerly.

"It is quite likely. I shall make my plans when I reach Readestown," declared Frank.

After the voyagers had dried their clothes the start for Ciudad was made. Frank found fortunately that he had an ample supply of money on his person.

This was one consolation.

Tramping through the tropical forest for five miles brought them to the plantation of a wealthy Gringo. Here they were hospitably received.

Don Estavan, the host, had not horses enough, but he dispatched a peon to an adjoining plantation where three of the hardy little ponies were secured.

That night the adventurers spent on a Venezuelan plantation. The next morning they wished their host adieu and rode away.

Forty-five miles on one day is a long journey in the tropics, but they finally made it, and at nightfall reached Angostura.

Their appearance created some little excitement, and the newspapers of the town came out with glowing accounts of the wonderful expedition.

A party of Gringos set out to recover the Moto-Van. Whether they succeeded or not our adventurers never knew. But if they did it is hardly likely that the vehicle proved of any material service to them.

The Americans spent several days of rest in Ciudad Bolivar. Then they embarked on board a steamer for Caracas, thence sailing for New York.

Their safe arrival was noted in due time. And here the great expedition came to an end.

All were very well pleased.

"When you get ready to return to Raraima be sure and let me know," said Peregrine in parting.

"I will do so," agreed Frank.

Professor Peregrine is yet in Washington. Frank Reade,

Jr., is at his home in Readestown. So also are Barney and Pomp, and with this announcement we beg to say for a time, au revoir.

THE END.

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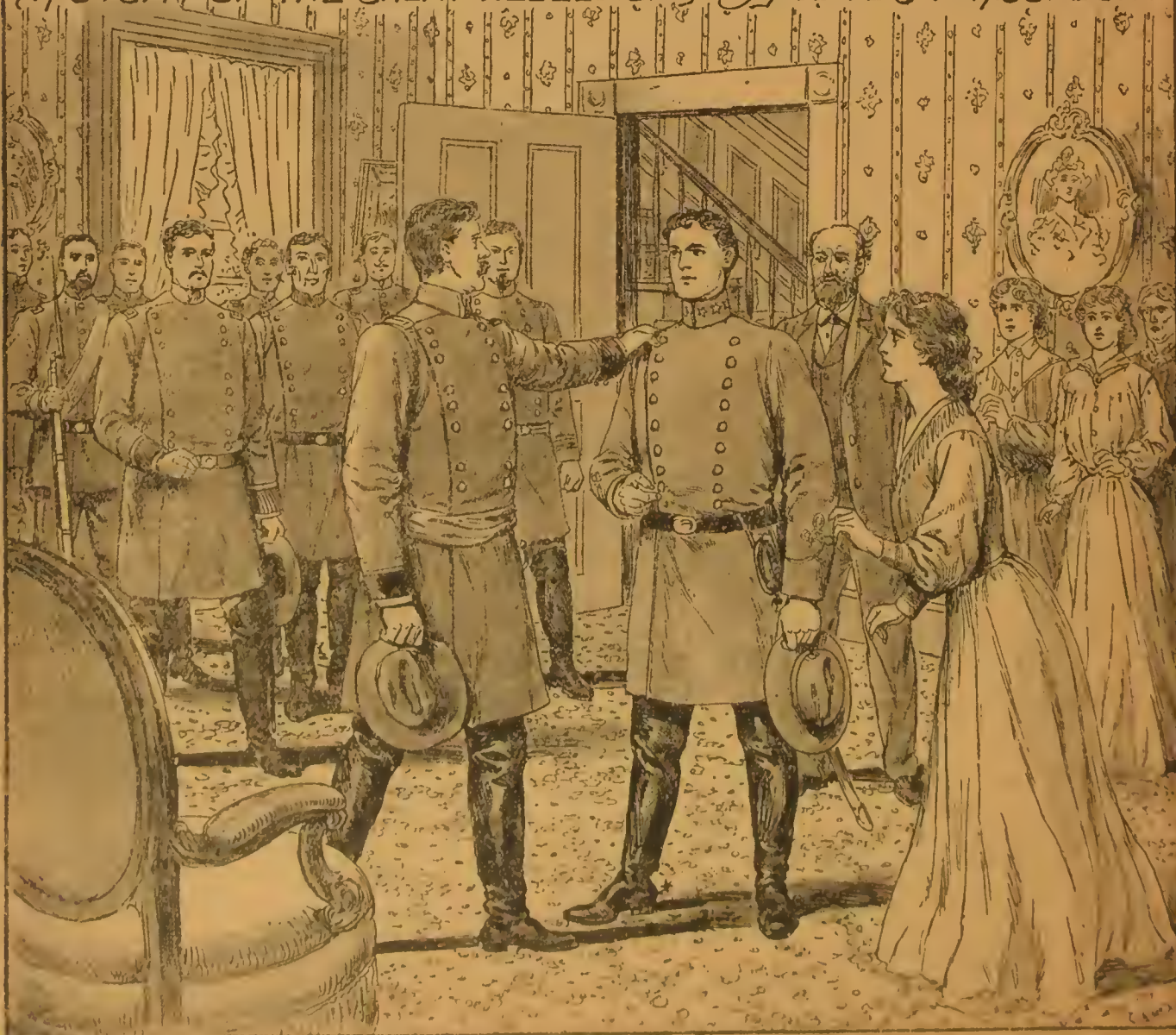
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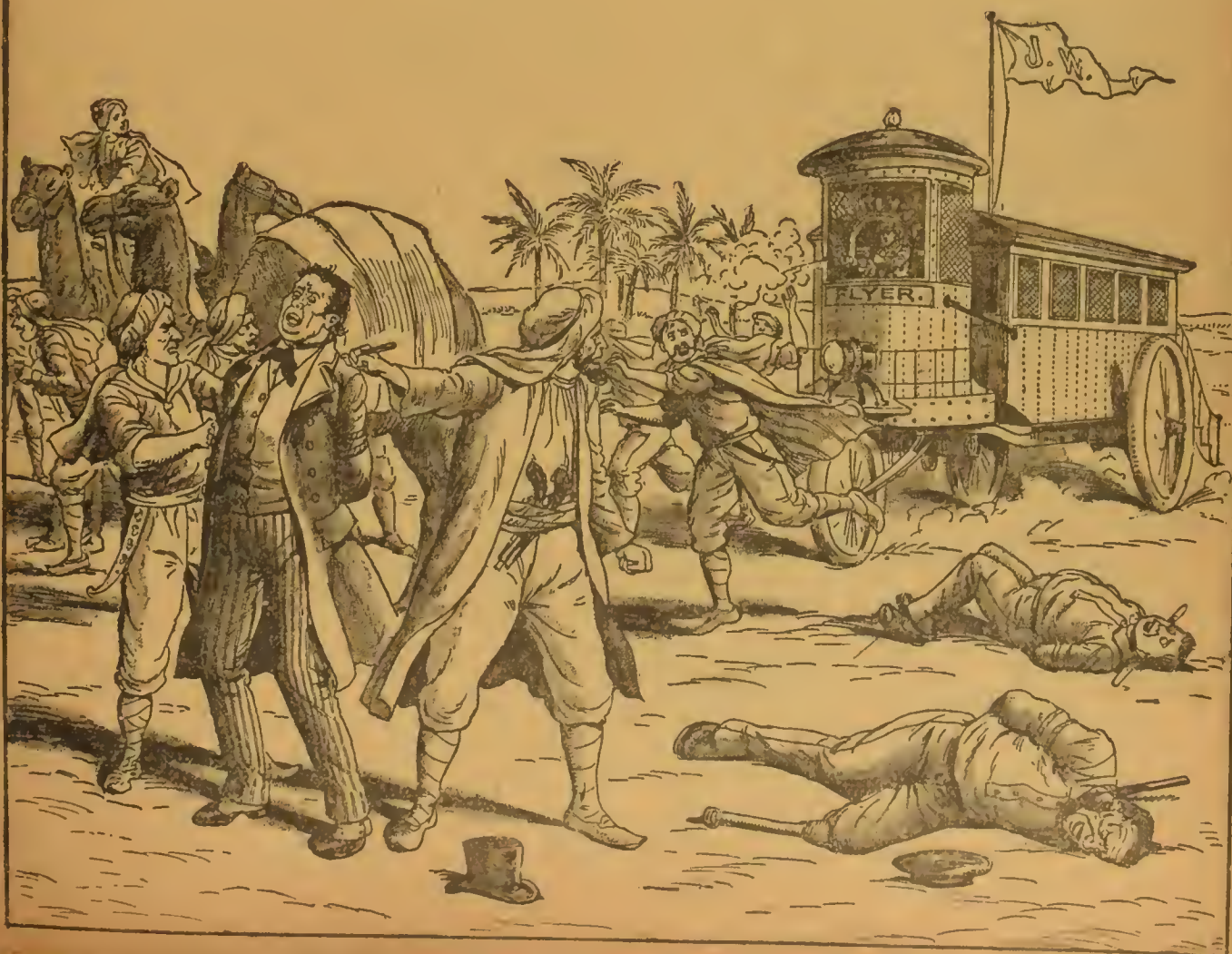
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